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## ISLA DE LOS MUERTOS.

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BY MRS. M. BURTON WILLIAMSON.

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[Written for Overland Monthly.]

As an illustration of nature's progress in removing one of her own landmarks, a little island in San Pedro Bay, known as Dead Man's Island, or more properly Isla de los Muertos, exhibits a fine example. Within a few years the whole facies of this island has been changed by the erosive power of waves and tides, as well as by the winter rains. The base of Dead Man's Island, daily lashed by the rushing waves, shows the effect of waves and tides, in their action on Pliocene rock; and that of the upper stratum, or summit, tells the story of the destructive power of rain on the more recent or quaternary formation. In the transactions of the I. L. Chap. of the A. A., the Hon. Delos Arnold says of Dead Man's Island: "To one who has spent many pleasant and profitable hours in this lonely spot, it cannot but cause an abiding sorrow to witness the devastation that is constantly and rapidly going on by the relentless waves. Within the recollection of persons now living the island has diminished one-half or more, and there are now living those who will see the tides sweeping over the spot where the receding island now stands, unless some steps are taken to protect it."

A few years ago the ocean side on the west of the island could only be reached either by way of the inner harbor or by climbing to the top of the island then descending down the precipitous trail, but now one can walk all around it without obstruction. This has been made possible by an arch cut through the solid rock. A hole, that appeared to be an entrance to a small cave in the rock, has been rapidly enlarged by the waves and breakers which beat with prodigious force against the base of the island until an arch has been formed in the solid rock. When the tide is high the breakers sweep through the arch, but when the tide is low one can easily pass through it around the island.

Dead Man's Island or "Isla de los Muertos," is so small it appears only like a pile of sandy soil in the ocean when viewed from the mainland, but many islands of far greater dimensions are of less value



to history or to science. Historically it is identified with the retaking of the capital of California, at that time the Pueblo de Los Angeles, and scientifically it has a national reputation on account of its fossil shells.

At one time it was possible to wade in the low water from the town of San Pedro to the island, but the building of an inner harbor between these two places has brought on a stretch of water that can only be spanned by a skiff or boat. A breakwater, a mile and one quarter long, connects Dead Man's Island on the east with a long sandy beach, formerly known as "Rattlesnake Island," though now called Terminal Island.

On a clear day the view from the top of Dead Man's Island is fine. One can see, on the west, the little watering place, Santa Catalina, with its narrow isthmus plainly visible, from twenty-five to thirty miles out in the Pacific Ocean. On the mainland, jutting out from the Palos Verdes Hills, Point Firmin, the lighthouse, defines itself against the horizon, then stretched along, one after another on the high bluffs, the towns of San Pedro, Wilmington, Long Beach and Alamitos encircle the bay of San Pedro.

It is easy to conjecture why the island is given so gruesome a cognomen as "Dead Man's Island," or "Isla de los Muertos," by the Spanish in California, as the name hints at a legend. Mr. Stephen C. Foster says that Col. J. J. Warner, who came to this coast in 1831, told him the island got its name from the fact that a sailor who died on a vessel trading on the coast was buried on the island, this was before Col. Warner came, as it bore that name when he arrived.

Some years after, when R. H. Dana, Jr., was a sailor before the mast in the American merchant service, he sailed on the California coast, and he has given us a graphic picture of the island. He was in San Pedro on Sunday and his brig, the *Pilgrim*, "lay in the offing," as far out as he could see, he says, "the only other thing which broke the surface of the great bay was a small, desolate-looking island, steep and conical, of a clayey soil and without the sign of vegetable life upon it, yet which had a peculiar and melancholy interest to me, for on the top of it were buried the remains of an Englishman, the commander of a small merchant brig, who died while lying in this port. It was always a solemn and interesting spot to me. There it stood, desolate and in the midst of desolation; and there were the remains of one who died and was buried alone and friendless. Had it been a common burying place it would have been nothing. The



single body corresponded well with the solitary character of everything around." This was in 1835, a strong contrast to the town-studded bay of today! "It was the only thing in California from which I could ever extract anything like poetry. Then, too, the man died far from home, without a friend near him, by poison, it was suspected, and no one to inquire into it, and without proper funeral rites, the mate, as I was told, glad to have him out of the way and into the ground without a word of prayer."

Although the sea gulls winged their flight for many years over the solitary and desolate grave of the Englishman, other victims, and this time of war, were carried up the hill and lowered into graves dug on its summit. In October, 1846, six American marines, who were killed or died of wounds in the fight at Dominguez ranch, were buried on this island, emphasizing it still more as the Isle of the Dead. As there is considerable variation in authorities in the given number of men killed in this fight, being variously estimated from "four" to "twelve" or "thirteen," as well as the number of graves on the island, I will give some notes copied from the log book of the U. S. S. Savannah for October, 1846. I am indebted to the Secretary of the Navy for this data: "In reply I have to inform you that the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, to whom your letter was referred for an examination of the log book of the U. S. S. Savannah, reports as follows:

"The log book of the U. S. S. Savannah for 1846 shows that the vessel was at Monterey, Cal., during August, 1846.

"First arrived in the Bay of San Pedro October 7, on which date an expedition was landed for the purpose of retaking the town of Pueblo de los Angeles,' (in the earlier official papers of the United States Los Angeles was written Los Angeles,) 'capital of California.' On landing William Smith (I. C. B.) was killed. (This was before the battle) by the accidental discharge of a pistol.'

"The log for October 9 states that 'at 2 the Angelos expedition arrived at the landing, having been unable to effect their object owing to the very superior force of the enemy.' . . .

"The following dead and wounded were brought on board, viz: Michael Hoy (sea,) David Johnson (O. S.) both dead; Charles Somers (musician,) mortally wounded. William Berry (sea,) severely wounded. . . . Charles Somers, who was mortally wounded in the action of yesterday, departed this life. At 9:30 sent the body of William Smith, who was accidentally killed, and the bodies of



Michael Hoy, James (?) Johnson and Charles Somers, who were killed in the action of yesterday, on an island for interment.'

"October 11 the log states that 'William B. Berry departed this life from wounds received in the action of the 8th. Buried body of W. H. Berry on Dead Man's Island.'

"On October 22 the log shows that 'Henry Lewis (marine) departed this life. . . . Buried on Dead Man's Island the remains of Henry S. Lewis (marine).'

"No further deaths were reported up to November 4, 1846, when the *Savannah* left the Bay of San Pedro.' Nothing has been found on the records of the department showing the exact size of this island at the time to which you refer." These extracts from the log book settle the question of the number killed in the fight and buried on the island during the month of October, 1846.

Of the fight at Dominguez Ranch, I am indebted for data to Mr. Stephen Foster, who came to California in 1847. In a letter received from him he says of the fight: "In August, 1846, Commodore Stockton took possession of Los Angeles and left a small garrison here. The Californians rose and drove the Americans out, and they went aboard a vessel at anchor at San Pedro. Captain Mervine came from the Bay of San Francisco with the frigate *Savannah* and started with about two hundred and fifty men afoot for Los Angeles. He had no artillery, and the Californians, all mounted, with a small cannon, met him on Dominguez ranch, about where Compton now stands, and there was a running fight for some three miles. The cannon was quartered in the road and the Californians would make a feint to charge and Mervine would mass his men together to resist cavalry, when the canon would be discharged, and the lancers would wheel about. This was repeated four or five times. Some eight or ten Americans were killed or wounded, the exact number I have never heard, but the dead and wounded were loaded on a cart taken from the Dominguez ranch and sailors pulled the cart to the beach and the dead were buried on the island."

In the history of California by Hubert H. Bancroft, he says of the cannon in the fight: "When Mervine came near, the gun was fired by Ignacio Aguilar, and was immediately dragged away by riatas attached to the horsemen's saddles, to be reloaded at a safe distance. This operation was repeated some half a dozen times in less than an hour. The first discharge did no harm, since the home-made powder was used, but at last the gun was properly loaded and



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the solid column affording an excellent target, each shot was effective. Six were killed and as many were wounded, if indeed the loss of Americans was not greater." As has been stated the official record settles the question of the number who died and were buried.

In his "Reminiscences of a Ranger," Major Horace Bell says of the gun used in the fight at Dominguez ranch that it was taken to Dead Man's Island on July 4, 1853, to fire off a national salute.

"Captain Sepulveda mustered and embarked his command on a large boat and proceeded up Wilmington Bay, where he embarked his artillery and sailed for Dead Man's Island, where, after infinite labor, he succeeded in mounting his battery on the highest point of the island, and all being ready we let loose such a thunder as was never exceeded by one gun. It seemed that we would wake the seven sleeping heroes who so quietly reposed on the little barren rock. Don Juan (Sepulveda) said the firing would serve a triple purpose, it would dissipate the last vestage of unfriendly feeling that may have lingered in the bosoms of the sons of the country toward the United States; that it would serve to express our gratitude to the great founders of modern liberty, and it would be an appropriate salute to the seven (six) brave marines who lost their lives in their country's service." . . .

"Don Juan proceeded to tell us how the seven" (there were seven graves, but not all of them killed at the fight at Dominguez Ranch,) "sailors came to be killed. Their wooden head-boards stood in line in front of us." After relating some incidents of the fight, Don Juan Sepulveda said: "The old gun was subsequently buried near my house, and after a nap of six years, here it is, and here am I, and others who dragged it away at the time; and here we are, all of us. the old gun, the old enemies, now friends, and here is brave Higuera, firing a salute of honor over our former foes, who fell in battle. Viva los Estados Unidos! Viva Mexico Somos Amigos.'" Another link in the history of this little island that connects it with the history of California.

A tangled growth of weeds on the summit of Dead Man's Island has made it impossible for me to distinguish more than five graves on the island, one, sunken two or three feet down, is, I presume, that of the unknown Englishman. One grave on the northwestern corner still has a number of chalk-white fossil shells mixed with yellow soil thrown up on either side of it. Fragments of fossil shells are strewn about the decaying foot and head-boards that mark other graves.



When I was on the island last spring, a companion "paced it" and fifty by one hundred feet proved to be its area. A few years ago a bed of white fossil shells, quaternary, was visible around its summit, but these have been washed down and lodged in the rock-pools at the base of the island. Nearly three hundred species and varieties of fossil shells have been collected on this island. The base of the island is a much older formation than on its loose, sandy summit. Here, near the base, we find fossil shells of the Pliocene, and possibly Miocene strata of rocks. To be able to pick up fossil shells while collecting living ones, is one of the unique experiences a collector can report from the island. And a few years ago conchologists could cut fossil shells from the soft, clayey soil at the bottom of a tide pool! The water would become roiled in tiny clouds as the knife dislodged the soil that formed a clayey matrix around the shell. A number of fine *Fusus barbarensis* and *Fusus corpulentus* were thus found embeded in rocks that formed the base of rock-pools, the home of numerous living mollusks. Dead Man's Island has supplied conchologists with many fossil mollusks now known only to inhabit, in any number, the waters of our northern coast; among these are *Chrysodomus tabulatus* and *Tritonium oregonensis*, the last-named being more especially a Puget Sound and Vancouver Island mollusk.

Identified with California in its history and its science, with all its inhabitants buried on the summit that rises a solitary pile above the ocean breakers, this little vanishing island should be considered as something more than a "desolate-looking island" on the Pacific Coast.